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TECHNICAL NOTE

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR - BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT

INTERPRETIVE PREMISE

by

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There are, perhaps, as many ideas of what interpretation is as there are interpreters. Most are familiar with the traditional definition authored by Freeman Tilden in 1957: "An educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, by first hand experience, and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information." Tilden emphasizes the difference between interpretative communication and the simple transfer of information. "Interpretation is the revelation of a larger truth that lies behind any statement of fact."

More recently writers have incorporated a functional aspect into the definition. Don Aldridge, of the Education Countryside Commission of Scotland writes: "Interpretation is the art of explaining the place of man in his environment, to increase visitor or public awareness of the importance of the relationship, and to awaken a desire to contribute to environmental conservation." (1973).

Many interpreters, when they read phrases like "man in his environment" and "contribute to environmental conservation", wonder where the boundaries are between interpretation and environmental education. The two are difficult to separate. Grant Sharpe offers this distinction: "..... interpretation is mostly directed to visitors to natural resource areas.... and is concerned with exploration of the resource in place as well as the management problems of such areas. Environmental education.....is largely directed toward school-age groups, and takes place in such widely diverse areas as schoolrooms, schoolyards, city streets, and on field trips to museums, parks, and forests." (1976). In Sharpe's discussion, the difference between interpretation and environmental education is in the approach as dictated by audience and location, rather than in messages or objectives. In this regard, interpretation can be considered a special approach to public environmental education which is employed by managers of natural and cultural resource areas.

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What is it about interpretation, then, that makes it special?

Tilden speaks of interpretation not as instruction but as provocation. The visitor is encouraged to "search out meanings for himself". (Tilden, 1957). The interpreter, or interpretive material, simply provides the tools with which the visitor builds his own relationships. The interpreter's role is not to provide all the answers, but rather to create a context - through evidence, discussion, and discovery - that motivates visitors to form their own conclusions. (Brown, 1971). If the visitor is provided with the necessary new concepts and is stimulated by the interpreter to formulate his own conclusions, the result is change - change in awareness, in attitudes, in behavior.

Change accomplished by interpretive programs leads, ideally, to the evolution of a personal environmental ethic. A primary interpretive goal is to instill an environmental ethic in enough visitors so that they achieve an overall public behavior that is environmentally sound. (Kuehner).

The returns to resource managers, although on a less idealistic scale, should not be discounted. Effective interpretive communication can significantly alter user behavior and attitudes toward the area and its managing agency. Interpreting regulations creates better understanding and therefore greater compliance. Interpreting management programs and policy involves the visitor in the nitty-gritty realities of resource decision-making, and wins for the agency respect and public support.

A major weakness of many interpretive programs is insensitivity to management problems and priorities. William E. Brown in Island of Hope writes: ".....the typical park or recreation area is managed on the premise that administration, maintenance, protection, and interpretation are separate functions rather than facets of an integrated whole." (1971).

"Ideally.....interpretation contributes in at least three ways to the health and perpetuation of the (resource) itself; First, it prods the manager to be a good environmental manager, because he wants to have something good to show. Second, by inviting the visitor into the family - making him privy to the inner councils of environmental management - he, too, learns to respect the area's environmental limits, and conforms to them. Ultimately, protection of quality environments depends on every man being his own (ecologist). Third, it leads especially interested segments of the public to participate as co-managers of the area; these are the people in universities and conservation groups who become the area's defenders against the pressures of degradation." (Brown, 1971).

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